

## In the Bondage of Meadville.

By RITA KELLEY.

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"It's no use talking to me," Ellen exclaimed. "My mind is fully made up." The man rose and, walking over to where the girl sat, stood looking down at her intently. She shifted uncomfortably under his gaze and finally slipped from her chair and fled ignominiously to the window, where, she felt sure, he was too proud to follow her.

"Oh, I know you are shocked!" she cried. "It's plainly a girl's mission in life to marry the first man who thinks he wants her and settle down to dishwashing and wiping the children's noses." She shivered in disgust, ignoring the look of pain that crossed his face. "That is what all the girls in town have done," she continued. "And because I am palled by the very wholesome monotony of it you think me an anomaly, an unwomanly girl, a reprobate. Bah!"

The defiant little rebel against the conventions of Meadville struck terror to the heart of Elton Maxwell, lately



SEE TOLD HIM THE WHOLE MISERABLE STORY.

chosen president of the Meadville Savings bank and owner of the fastest trotter on the Meadville county fair race track. He looked at her helplessly and cleared his throat.

"But we could keep a hired girl, Ellen," he said, and, brightening, "you could drive Fanny G. wherever you liked. You wouldn't be tied down. We'd run up to Chicago often to the theater. You would have a much easier time than any of the girls," he finished proudly.

Ellen looked at him a moment pityingly. How apparent were the limitations of his mind! Then she fired a

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death dealing bomb into the enemy's camp.

"I'm going to study art!" she said triumphantly.

"Ellen, no!" The horror in his voice was genuine.

Years ago another rebellious maiden of Meadville had expressed the same resolve, and it was like "Jane, Jane, she never was the same." There were dark hints of unseemly behavior, and the girl never became an artist and never returned home. To young Maxwell's mind his sweetheart was as good as lost already, though he broached the possibility of marrying him and then seeking the higher plane which the dullness of Meadville seemed to render imperative, but she quickly snatched the heart out of him.

"No," she said; "I shall be wedded to my art instead. It isn't that I want to do it exactly," she added, in a quick pity. "Maybe some time I'll find that you are the best, Elton, but not now. I must try. I'm so deathly sick of matrimony by the job lot!"

The amateurish daubs on the four sides of the little parlor appeared frightfully flat and unpromising as she turned from watching Elton walk down the street, the spring gone from his step, his face paler than she had ever seen it. But she must try! A year ago she would have given her two eyes for the love she had so lightly refused today, but that was before she had climbed the hill of knowledge and realized that her only habitation thenceforth must be in the realm of art, not stale old Meadville. She was packed, ready to go the moment the director of the big art school should say the word.

Her father stepped gingerly into the best room.

"A letter, Ellen. Must be from that art school. Have you got your things all packed ready to go? I reckon you'll come back 'bout the biggest picture painter in the country. Won't scarcely know us then, will you?"

The unwonted tenderness in her father's voice and the real misgiving in the last sentence, ill disguised by the short laugh, made her heart suddenly contract. How good every one was to her! Even her father and mother were ready to sacrifice painfully, even to the point of placing her on a plane where she would be ashamed to recognize them as her humble Meadville parents if thereby she would be rendered happy.

She clung to her father in an unaccustomed, wholly demonstrative fashion that embarrassed him.

"There, there," he said patting her hair awkwardly. "Read your letter. Maybe they don't want you to come so soon. I must go wash for supper."

It was true—they didn't want her to come so soon. In fact, they didn't want her to come at all. The director unkindly said satirical things about her cows—a study from nature—and suggested housework as a surer means of gaining renown.

It was a horrible shock. She did not cry; she was too stunned and humiliated for that; she had only enough reason left to wonder doubly how she could tell her parents that their sweet confidence had been misplaced—that their child always was and always would be a nobody.

The stuffy little parlor, the hateful daubs, had grown intolerable. Pulling a shawl from its hook in the narrow hall, she fled from the house and up the narrow street redolent of beef-steak, coffee and hot cakes—Meadville's favorite supper. Every one left the blinds up in Meadville, and there was a panorama of warm interiors, romping children, contented husbands and active, happy wives. Ellen, hurrying along in the chill gloom, felt like a pariah and passed quickly out of the din of dishwashing on to the country road.

She was brought at last to a realization of her whereabouts by a startled cry and jumped back barely in time to escape a horse's hoofs that just grazed her sleeve as the horse was pulled back on its haunches. The starlight was sufficient to indicate her close call. She uttered a belated but frightened shriek.

"By George!" exclaimed the man somewhere back of the horse. "What are you doing out here? Are you drunk?"

"Say, are you hurt?" he continued in alarm, as there was no reply. He sprang to the ground, groped his way forward and plucked at her sleeve.

"Ellen!"

She began to sob. She couldn't help it. There had been too many shocks in Meadville that day.

It did not take Elton long to get her into the runabout and start up the erstwhile spurned Fanny G. Ellen continued to be so distressed that Elton, ignoring the fact that she had just refused him, slipped his arm around her and was not repulsed. Unfortunately, so it seemed, his extreme kindness and lack of curiosity about her plight served only to increase her discomfort until, as he helped her to alight from the vehicle at her gate, she caught him close about the neck and told him the whole miserable story.

"How can I tell father and mother?" she cried.

"Leave that to me," he whispered jubilantly, "and cheer up."

The old people jumped to their feet as the door flew open, and a look of intense relief crossed their faces at the sight of Ellen and Elton.

"Oh, we didn't know what had become of you the last night you were here," said her mother a little reproachfully, but she smiled indulgently at Elton, and he smiled back.

"And whom should she be with?" he cried. "But I have good news for you. She isn't going away. She's promised to become a Meadville matron."

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If Ellen had had fears, they were immediately dissipated by the warmth of her mother's embrace and the happy ejaculation of her father as he grasped Elton's hand. It dawned upon her at the instant that they were happier to know she was to marry the most promising young man in Meadville than they would be if she could surpass all the artists in history, and suddenly it appeared to her that she was the happiest of all and that Meadville—poor, cramped, despised Meadville—was a garden of Eden.

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